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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 004196

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: GOT CIRCULAR ON ARMENIAN "GENOCIDE" SEEN AS
ANTI-REFORM EFFORT

Classified by Polcouns John Kunstadter; reasons 1.5 b and d.

11. (C) Summary: Turkish Education Ministry has urged all fifth- and seventh-graders to write an essay arguing that allegations that the Ottomans committed genocide against Armenians are "baseless." The Ministry also asked schools to organize conferences on the issue, and seven teachers have been indicted for comments made during one such conference. Our contacts, both in and outside the GOT, are mostly embarrassed by these measures, but the chairman of the parliamentary Human Rights Committee defended the essays. Academics and human rights activists said they believe the military-dominated National Security Council (NSC) is behind the measures. End Summary.

Students Urged to Write About "Baseless" Allegations

12. (U) Education Minister Celik in April issued a circular urging all schools in Turkey to have their fifth- and seventh-graders prepare a one-page essay arguing that the allegations that Turkey committed genocide against Armenians are "baseless." The essays have been submitted to the Education Ministry, which will review them and announce in September the winners of the national competition.

Armenian Schools Ignoring Contest

13. (U) Turkey's Armenian schools were included in the distribution of the circular. However, Hrant Dink, editor of the Istanbul-based Armenian newspaper Agos, told us the Armenian schools are not participating in the voluntary essay competition. Still, he said, knowledge of the competition is a kind of "psychological torture" for Turkish Armenians.

Teachers Arrested at Conference

14. (U) The circular also asked schools to organize conferences on the "baseless" allegations. At one such conference, seven teachers were arrested June 2 in the southeastern province of Kilis when one teacher, Hulya Akpinar, got into a dispute with the speaker and was joined by six others when she walked out in protest. Prosecutors have indicted the seven teachers, and accuse Akpinar of claiming during the conference that the Ottoman State had massacred 800,000 Armenians as part of a deliberate policy. According to press reports, however, the dispute began after Akpinar asked the speaker whether the GOT had a policy on how it would respond if the Armenian lobby managed to persuade many countries to accept the genocide allegations. Akpinar has reportedly been dismissed from her job.

Parliamentary and GOT Reactions Mixed

15. (C) We have raised concerns about the circular and the indictment with a number of GOT contacts and other public figures. Most were visibly embarrassed by the issue, but Mehmet Elkatmis, president of the parliamentary Human Rights Committee, defended the measures. Elkatmis argued that the Education Minister "did the right thing" by encouraging students to "study" the Armenian accusations. When we noted that the circular required students to reach a specific conclusion, Elkatmis argued that was justified, given the GOT's policy on the issue. Elkatmis further averred that the arrest of the teachers was "not an international incident"

and noted that the teachers were "only under investigation" and that none remained in detention. (Note: It was clear to us that Elkatmis had not been aware of the issue; his responses were prompted by an advisor who whispered in his ear. End Note).

16. (C) However, Koksall Toptan, chairman of the parliamentary Justice Committee, said the circular and the indictment reflect the fact that human rights reform in Turkey is incomplete. "We have deficiencies in implementation (of reforms)," he said. "There is no question about that." Toptan predicted that the charges against the teachers will be dropped. Abdulkadir Kaya, Justice Ministry Director General for International Relations, called the indictment of the teachers "stupid, unacceptable," but said the Justice Ministry does not have the authority to intervene in the case. "We are stuck with it for now," he lamented.

Others Blame NSC and Reform Opponents

17. (C) Prominent political reformer and civil society activist Berna Turkili, pointing to what she called the "Soviet-like" line on her identity card listing religion, sees the contest as a reflection of continuing paranoia on the part of an Establishment which wants to keep Turkey anchored in the revolutionary nationalist fervor of the Republic's initial period.

18. (C) Suavi Aydin, Hacettepe University anthropology professor and expert on Anatolian minorities; Baskin Oran, Ankara University international relations professor; and Yavuz Onen, Human Rights Foundation chairman, all told us they blame the NSC for the measures (Note: We have no information confirming NSC involvement. End Note).

19. (C) "There is no way the Education Minister did this on his own," Aydin claimed. Aydin argued that the circular is a reaction by establishmentarian elements of the State opposed to human rights reform and EU membership. These elements seek to delay the reform process by pumping life into traditional Turkish paranoia over issues such as Armenian genocide allegations, Cyprus, and relations with Greece, he said. Onen believes the circular has two purposes: 1) to warn the GOT against any effort to radically change policies toward Armenia, and 2) to ensure that the next generation of Turks accepts the State view of the genocide allegations. Oran characterized the circular as a typically clumsy effort by the Establishment, and predicted the backlash will actually prove beneficial. "We have to thank the opposition (to reform) for being stupid," he said. Public reaction to the arrest of the teachers will generate more open debate about the genocide allegations, and relations with Armenia, just as the GOT's crackdown on Kurdish cultural expression has broadened the debate on the Kurdish issue, he said.

110. (C) Editor of intellectual center-left "Radikal" Ismet Berkan, whose wife is of Armenian descent and whose May 15 column sharply criticized the essay contest, differed on the contest's origin. Responding to our comment that Education Minister Celik (from Van, which had a sizable Armenian population until 1915) has long been a contributor to the genocide denial camp, Berkan averred that the stimulus for the contest came from lower-level retrograde Ministry officials trying to curry favor with Celik.

Comment

11. (C) Turkish authorities have long made legal arguments for rejecting the term "genocide," and otherwise handled the question in a short-sighted, hyper-defensive manner, for example by issuing counter accusations of an Armenian "genocide" of Turks. More and more Turks appear to us to have an inkling of what happened on both sides, and have begun to argue that this issue should be left for historians. It is reprehensible, therefore, to ask young students to take on this burden, especially considering that Turkish textbooks provide nothing but propaganda on the question.